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Where We are Not

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by

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Report

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Abstract

Where We Are Not

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This report outlines the primary concerns in my painting practice, that of material, surface, line weight, and barriers.

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Where We Are Not

1. Unfulfilled Desire

I want things or people. There are certain things that I become fixated on acquiring, not so much to have the object itself, but to have the vision of myself in that object or with that object. What would it look like? Because somehow, the object embodies something about myself that I want.

I chase things that I can't have. I am the master of a slow seduction, looking from far away and indicating interest with my eyes. I can summon men from across the room with a certain glance, and they will come, but it's never the actual man that I want, it's the attention, the slow buildup of anticipation that I stoke carefully but never allow to come to a head, the drawn-out process of looking, of wanting, of thinking, but always knowing that I won't have it. There's something about this state of longing, of wanting, that I find fulfilling. It gives shape to my days, a new flirtation giving a boost to my ego and a forward momentum in what can feel like a long stretch of grey days ahead. When one attraction inevitably fizzles out, I let something else take its place. I am always stuck in a still position, spurred on by the feeling of wanting, without a fixed goal.

What is wanting? An ache for something, the drive to fill an emptiness that exists somewhere in the vicinity of my chest and stomach, but also stasis. The word want implies a state of not having, for if I had it, I would not want anymore. It is a state of unfulfillment, emptiness, a strange type of energy. I can measure my life in the phases of people who I have wanted, people or things who I have never let myself have.

I hold myself back from getting what I want. It seems to be an old-fashioned notion of right or wrong, knowing that I shouldn't want more when I have enough. At a certain point I

know I have to leave it alone and not get any closer. Wanting is a way of teasing myself, tempting my own restraints before stepping back.

I find a similar type of pleasure in the process of painting. I chase the barest flicker of an image in my mind, and the more I work towards it the more it feels as if it is skipping ahead, just out of reach. I pursue it in my work and it teases me, elusive, and I hunt to wrest the full thing out of my mind and through my hands.

My work seduces from across the room. The paintings have concentrated fields of energy that the lines gather and disperse towards the viewer. There is seduction in the subtle roughness of the surfaces, a texture I know intimately from having traced my hand against it repeatedly as I draw. The slight ridges in the weave that the gesso emphasizes catch against my skin and tools. There is seduction in the careful placement of color against the canvas color itself, in the quiet washes and slight iridescence of my paintings, things that take time to see. The paintings hold something of themselves back, even when they are fully realized, shapes blocking something else off.

I constrain myself by imposing a system to work within. Currently, I have a set of material and process rules, such as working only with graphite, making the paintings out of horizontal and vertical lines, staying within the barrier shapes (see Figure 1 below). These rules confine but allow me to play in between the structures, bounding the otherwise boundless possibilities of painting that is all too easy to get lost in. By playing within my rules and occasionally breaking them, painting becomes a puzzle or game I play against and with myself, trying to put the pieces into a whole and changing the whole sweep of the game when things stagnate.



Figure 1



Figure 2

2. Fences: Seeing But Not Going

After years of growing up in Texas, where the buildings are low and the horizon is present, I still look for where the sky meets the earth. I am drawn to the straightness of the horizon line, the unrelenting solidity of it to ground myself in space. When I lived in New York, I felt hemmed in by the imposing verticality of buildings around me. I could rarely see the horizon, but I could look up at the slashes of sky that were allowed to show through. Coming back to Texas, I reveled in the stretches of open land I could see again.

I regularly drive back and forth from Austin to Houston, where my family lives. There's something both soothing and frustrating about the landscape in between the two cities. I find it beautiful, with its open stretches and herds of placid cows. It's surrounded by lines of barbed wire to keep the cows in, so I can never enter these spaces. Subconsciously, I even expect any land I see to be privately owned after years of living in Texas, where the culture of ownership and property are strong. I can look through the cracks and see what is on the other side, but I am not welcome to go through. There is a strong confrontation in the shape of fences. They don't back down, they're visible, and they're easy to see.

I like looking through people's fences during my evening walks. People block off their front yards, enclosing a garden, a playground, or nothing more than just their lawn. Most of the time, the front yard fences are short, so I can see over the top and into the yard, sometimes even into the house windows. On occasion the fences are very built up, but there are always cracks to peer through. There's one house in particular with thick barricades, practically a wall, that I pass on my walks, and this house has expansive floor to ceiling windows. Perhaps the fencing serves as their blinds, or perhaps they like looking at the inside of their own barriers.

Fences bring up questions of space, property, ownership, and fear. In Brantlinger's book *Barbed Wire*, he suggests that fences are a sign of fear, as they function to keep something out. In the history of enclosing common land, fences demarcated public land that had been suddenly converted to private land. As a result, people are displaced and community resources are commoditized, with profits flowing into the hands of the new owners, not the community. What really are those walls keeping out, or what are they keeping in? Fences are a statement of possession, but of what?



Figure 3

I remember traveling to Scotland and learning that their citizens have the right to roam. When I went walking with my friend there, he simply lifted the latch on a farmer's gate, walked through, motioned for me to follow, and then closed the gate. I was shocked at the nonchalance with which he trespassed into what I considered to be someone else's land. But to him, it was natural, it was a right that he was born with, the ability to roam. I felt free to walk across endless amounts of other people's fields, see the landscape as unfettered and available for me to access.



Figure 4



Figure 5

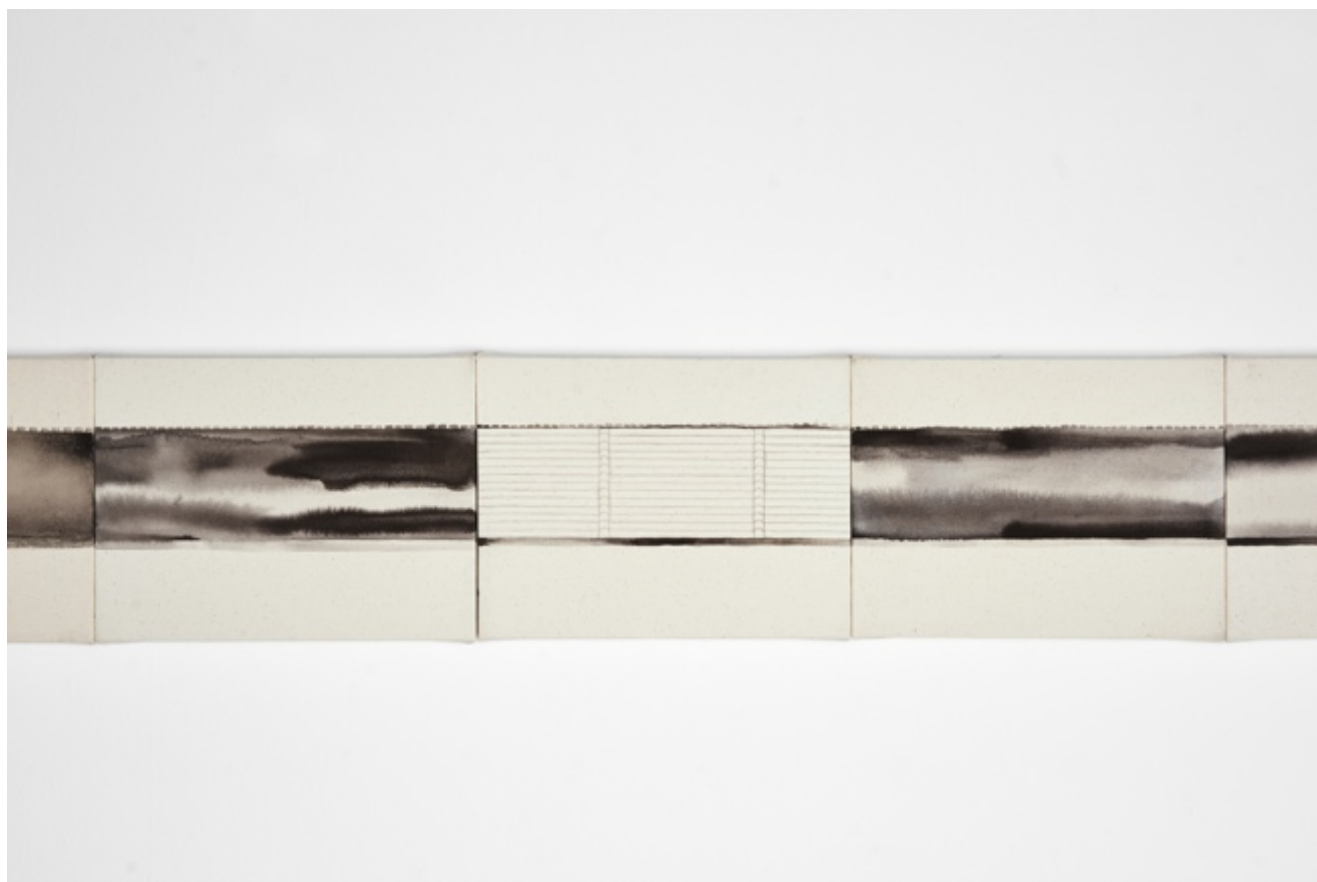


Figure 6

3. Process

I think through my paintings formally, with a conceptual idea running loosely through. The image is most important to me in the painting process. I will draw from the memory of something I have seen or from a photograph I have taken. Most of the source images are things that I have documented. I look for a juxtaposition of line, a place where horizontal and vertical run into each other. Sometimes it is simple-- a man in front of his house gardening, bending over in front of a line of fences; a friend's backyard fence with a pole behind it; the patterning of the chain link in front of a pool under construction; the lines on the bottom of a pool meeting the wall. Often, my work references places that I frequent. A deep familiarity with a place enables me to carry the image in my head, and re-imagine it again as painting. Though the paintings start by referencing a particular place, my goal is that they move beyond it, letting the original reference just be a pictorial or structural vehicle with which I can ask questions of space, abstraction, and process.

I make more drawings than paintings, and in the drawings I find the freedom to try out different ideas. There are multiple drawings of the same thing; some will stay drawings, and a few will want more-- more physicality, more space, more something. These become my paintings.



Figure /



Measuring and re-drawing play a large role in the process of making my work. If I have a specific structure in mind, I measure out the lines ahead of time and mark it out in pencil. This pencil outline serves as a guide for me to go back over the marks with another material. I find this action of going over a line I've already drawn soothing and liberating-- I can see ahead of me what I plan to do and concentrate solely on how I want to manipulate the line. Though there is a field of guidelines already drawn out for me, I can still change in the moment how thick or thin the line is, the speed of the mark, how the ink disperses when I put the point of the brush down. Measuring and planning give me room to play without having to continuously invent.

Intuition is important to me and I think of it as another sense. Painting is a process of trusting myself and letting my hand and my eye guide me. I have to stay responsive and open to what the painting tells me. The physicality of making and working with materials that have their

own will gives me something to push or pull against. I think through making a painting, and the resulting painting is a record of my thought, and index of my time, and serves as the physical marker of my hands.

4. The Line

The line carries the structure in my work. One line can change in thickness, intensity, value, and fineness in one length. The lines in my work are traces of my hand, and the implied time and weight of the action can be felt through looking. Line has a transformative power, holding the ability to shift solid objects into lightness and complicated forms into something easier to parse. My paintings are made up of lines, and lines hold my forms together. It is the simplest way for me to make a mark and think.

The delicacy of the line ties back to my violin playing days. There is a structure and sensitivity to the visuals of reading music. The notes rest on five lines, the eye moves across horizontally, and that gets translated into sound, sound that holds time. The quality of the sound depends on minute adjustments to either of the hands. I think about drawing the sound out of the instrument, and similarly, I think of the lines in my paintings as drawing the beauty out of my work. It lets them breathe, gives space between and within the barriers, and the minute adjustments in my line quality bring the painting alive. Because my lines are gathered in some places and spread out in others, the energy in the surface is focused, instead of being all over. The more evenly spaced the lines are, the more diffuse the energy is. In the juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical the energy is released.

There is a delicate balance between tension, drawing, and pressure to make beauty. The material-- graphite or ink on canvas-- is so responsive to my physical adjustments that it yields a delicate image. The paintings are highly dependent on my ability to touch, feel, and sense the canvas or the snap of the brush wielding the ink. If I misread something or rush through a passage, the tension in the work can fall apart. My work depends on a focused and tranquil state in making and viewing. The surface is left to show through, getting worked into the painting as

an essential part of the composition, space, texture, and color. There is very little room for error or erasing because the treatment of the surface is so delicate.

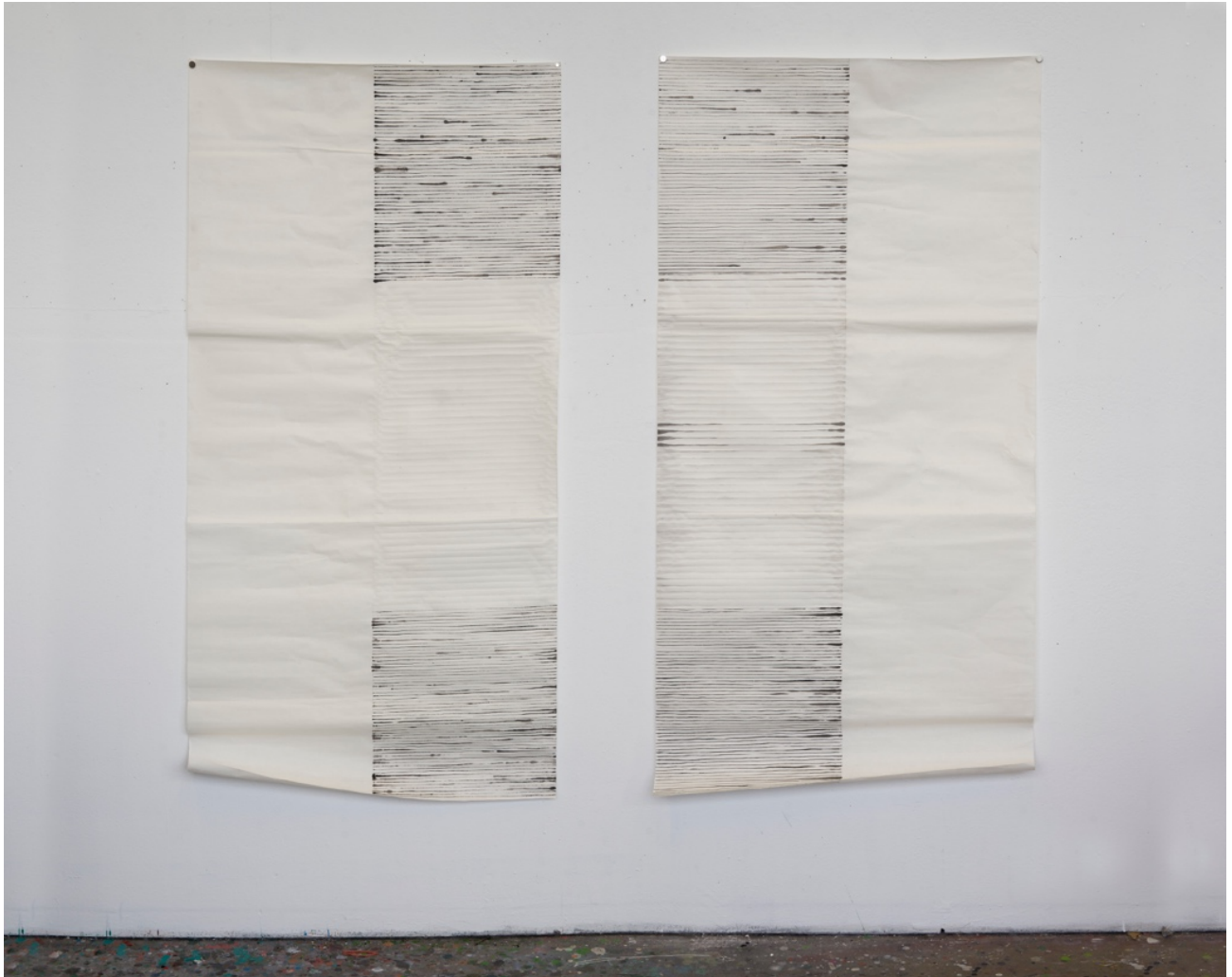


Figure 9

There is a tradition of sensitive line in Chinese ink paintings. I grew up being surrounded by that type of work, reproduced cheaply in calendars and handed out at the grocery store for free, in the drawings books my dad would bring back from Hong Kong for me, or in the calligraphy bestowing good luck and fortune upon our house. They were elegant drawings that used line economically to give the lightest impression of life and movement. In doing so, the landscapes had so much space to breathe, so much life in the emptiness. The empty portions of

the scroll were spatial even though they had no marks; they gave the impression of airiness to the space inside the painting. Because there are minimal moves, each mark is imbued with importance. There is room for a quieter but equally strong energy to pulse through the painting in the reduction, a quality I look for in my own work as well. I find them meditative and pure in their visual sparseness.

5. Barriers

Barriers ask the question of what is inside and what is outside. Bachelard, in his book *The Poetics of Space*, has a chapter on the dialectics of the two spaces. He posits that inside and outside can be translated into the ideas of being and non-being, as man (the interior self) is confronted with the being of the world (the outside). Man is trapped in a state of being, but we must come outside of ourselves in order to interact with the world, before coming back into our own being to process it. In this way, “everything is circular, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses (Bachelard 214).” Bachelard seems to suggest that there is no fixed place of being, but that we are wandering in a spiral within ourselves. This nebulous location of being/non-being, inside/outside, where things repeat and come again in a fruitless search for the locus of ourselves, is reflected in the reliance of repetition in the work. Just as there is no fixed place of being, the barriers (conceived as the physical delineation between inside and outside) are translucent, disembodied, not solid, permeable. The space on the other side is loose, suggested, also insubstantial. The openness of my fences allows the viewer to move back and forth between the surface and the image.

The barriers function as both a metaphoric and visual barrier. They rise to the forefront of the painting and confront the viewer. They also add a visual texture and pattern, moving the viewer across from the right to the left of the painting. My fences hint at something beyond. There is always a gap that I can look through, or something to be seen over the tops of the fences. In a way, the barriers are generous and tempting, offering glimpses of something just beyond in the vague hope of being let through.



Figure 10

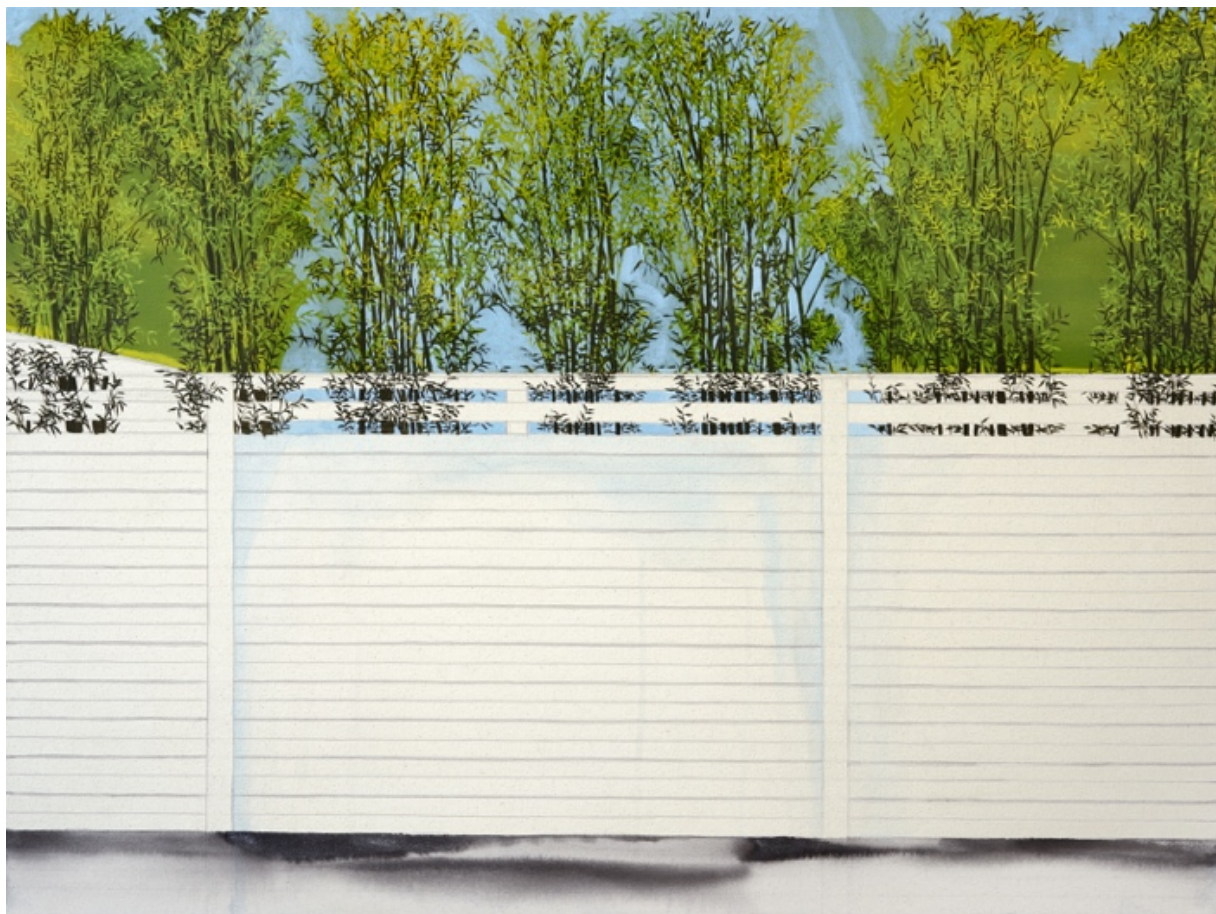


Figure 11

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